Sponsorship of Women's Collegiate Sport: Corporate Objectives and Effectiveness Assessment

Kuo-Wei Lee, National Taichung University of Education
Chi-Wen Yang, Texas Women's University
Ping-Chao Lee, National Taichung University of Education

Abstract 2012-232
Marketing
Friday, May 25, 2012
3:40 PM

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Women's sport has grown steadily in the aspects of sponsorship, endorsement, media coverage, and participation rates since the 1990s (Spencer & McClung, 2001). As women's purchasing power has increased, corporate sponsors have become more interested in this previously neglected market segment (Lough & Irwin, 2001). In recent years, tremendous amounts of sponsorship expenditure on women's sport gradually emerged in the international marketplace, and corporations who sponsored women's sport received an effective return on investment (IEG, 2003; 2005).

Collegiate women's basketball has been one of the most popular women's sports and has garnered much interest from corporate sponsors. There were over 11 million spectators in 2008-2009 (NCAA, 2009), which was an increase of more than 2.5 million spectators in the past decade (NCAA, 2000; 2009). Furthermore, Lough (1996) indicated that budget considerations, including cost-effectiveness, affordability, and access to potential buyers were the primary factors in influencing the development of corporate engagement in women's sports sponsorship, and that achievement of objectives was also regarded as the most utilized factor in sponsorship selection decisions. Exchange theory has been used to explain many marketing exchanges. The sponsorship relationship is the process of exchange (McCarville & Copeland, 1994; Sam, Batty, & Dean, 2005). The basic assumption of exchange theory is that individuals enter into new associations because they expect doing so will be rewarding (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Although there is a large volume of literature and research pertaining to sport sponsorship, most previous research has focused on men and high competitive level sports (Lough & Irwin, 2001). There is no research specifically regarding objectives and factors which may influence the attainment of collegiate women's sport sponsorship. However, the studies regarding sponsorship objectives of those companies who sponsor women's sport and collegiate sport were undertaken and indicated that an increase in awareness is one of the major sponsorship objectives in both settings (Lough & Irwin, 2001; Sparks & Westgate, 2002; Tomasini, Frye, & Stotlar, 2004). In accordance with this need, this study explored collegiate women's sport sponsorship by examining the reasons in which sponsors engage in the sponsorship exchange process and by assessing sponsorship effectiveness through examining recall and recognition rates and purchase intentions of attendees at NCAA Division II women's basketball games.

This study focused on the women's sports sponsorship of a university at the NCAA Division II level. Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used to collect and analyze research data. Nine representatives from selected corporate sponsors of the university athletic department were interviewed regarding sponsors’ decision-making process. Spectators' (N = 155) sponsorship awareness was assessed utilizing a questionnaire. The qualitative data gathered from these interviews were organized and analyzed using a qualitative software package, NVivo 7. Descriptive statistics, T-tests, and one way ANOVAs were used to analyze the data collected from the questionnaires to examine the recall, recognition rates, and purchase intentions.

Results of the interviews indicated that increasing awareness, increasing sales, enhancing image, reaching target markets, and maintaining relations were the major objectives expected by corporate sponsors. The findings revealed spectators' recall and recognition rates at Division II women's basketball were considerably higher than those at Division I men and women's basketball, Division I men's football, and LPGA (Cunee & Hannan, 1993; Shannon & Turley, 1997; Stotlar & Johnson, 1989). Recall and recognition rates were influenced by size of signage, activation, and long-term sponsorship involvement. Purchase intentions of spectators at Division II women's basketball games were less than those at Division I men's and women's basketball games (Shannon & Turley, 1997). The findings of
this study will benefit university administrators, women's sport sponsors, and sport marketing scholars in further understanding the value of sponsorships at women’s collegiate sport, particularly at the Division II level.